

Ashington High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	122355
Local Authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	314276
Inspection dates	26–27 September 2007
Reporting inspector	Jim Bennetts

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	13–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1250
6th form	200
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Chris Smith
Headteacher	Mr Ken Tonge
Date of previous school inspection	1 November 2003
School address	Green Lane Ashington Northumberland NE63 8DH
Telephone number	01670 812166
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This is one of two secondary upper schools serving the former mining communities of Ashington and surrounding villages. The great majority of students are of White British heritage; the proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is a little higher than that found nationally; the proportion with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is higher than average. This is a specialist school for sport; it has recently taken on a second specialism: leadership (allied with modern languages). In September 2007, the Ashington Learning Partnership was formed. This establishes a federation network comprising this school, two middle schools and two first schools. These have all changed category to become Trust schools: the Ashington Learning Partnership Trust. Curricular coordination and management are being aligned across this network. However, this inspection reports solely on the work of Ashington Community High School Sports College.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school; its students do well, they enjoy what they do and generally give of their best. A few years ago the school was improving at a prodigious rate. It is still improving, but less rapidly.

Students joining the school at age 13 have standards that are a little lower than those found nationally. Tests at age 14 show that good progress has been made and the 2007 results show some improvement on the previous year. Results at age 16 demonstrate good achievement when compared with students' standards at age 11. On some measures, these results are distinctly better than those of 2006. Other measures suggest that year on year improvement is not as great as in the past. In the sixth form students make good progress; sixth form results are better than in the past. Throughout the school boys and girls of all abilities generally do well.

Teaching and learning are good. No lessons seen were unsatisfactory, three quarters of lessons were good or better and an eighth of them were outstanding. Teachers plan well and encourage excellent classroom relationships. Students are keen to learn. They are provided with a good curriculum.

Students are proud of their school and positive about education. Behaviour is good, and in lessons it is often outstanding. In lessons they are keen to learn and highly compliant, but they often hesitate to take initiative. The school has a 'zero tolerance' policy on some kinds of poor behaviour, consequently exclusions are higher than in some similar schools. Students are well looked after. There are generally effective systems to track their progress, but the assessment information gathered could sometimes be more reliable and its interpretation sharper. The classroom needs of those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well looked after; in the main, their behavioural difficulties are suitably attended to.

The school is well led and managed by dedicated senior staff who are fervent in their desire for further improvements. They have been tireless and visionary in implementing some recent initiatives – for instance in efforts to invigorate the learning culture and engage the full support of parents. There are no subject areas with serious shortcomings. However, the school is aware that the way teachers are matched to classes in some subjects, and the way some coursework is organised calls for review. Some quality assurance systems, whilst generally good, need honing to become precision tools for further improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Sixth form students are proud of their school and rate highly the teaching and guidance they receive. In lessons they are industrious and keen to do well, though occasionally over cautious and reluctant to jump ahead with their thinking. They recognise that they need to be able to organise their work and revision, and that this prepares them well for university and the work place. They are well taught. Teachers have excellent subject knowledge and watch over students' development diligently. Progress is good. There is a wide range of courses; worthwhile subjects with a small uptake are subsidised. There is a large group for further mathematics, demonstrating the popularity of mathematics in the school. Students value the opportunity to have a say in things and take a leadership role. A substantial number have blossomed through opportunities to make enterprising and life changing expeditions, for instance to the Inca Trail, and through

the associated fund raising activities. They would like better access to information and communication technology (ICT) facilities and a better common room. They say the encouragement of the fit and less fit in sport and training is enthusiastic yet sensitive. They say the dancing is fantastic.

What the school should do to improve further

- Seek ways of furthering improvement in achievement by refining assessment, the tracking of progress and evaluation of organisation in departments.
- Cultivate students' independence in learning and help them to understand better how to improve their work day by day.
- Review ways of rendering behaviour and attitudes even better, particularly with the management of attendance and exclusions.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students' achievement is good and standards are average. Boys and girls make similar progress and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities generally do well. Sport is of high quality throughout the school.

Students join the school from two middle schools at age 13, with a year to go to national tests in English, mathematics and science. At age 11, their standards were below average. At age 14, standards in 2006 were still not as high as the national average in any of the three subjects tested. However, students make good progress and, when all factors are considered, the headway made to age 14 generally compares favourably with that of the best 25% nationally. In 2007, there was improvement in the numbers achieving above average levels in mathematics and science.

At GCSE, provisional data shows the proportion achieving 5 A*-C grades, inclusive of mathematics and English, rose from 35% to 38% this year. These results indicate good progress from student's starting points at 11: almost in the top 25% nationally. There is some uncertainty in the overall GCSE picture for 2007, as the examination authority is investigating anomalous results in science, which is a subject with a double GCSE award. Many schools have introduced, on a substantial scale, alternative courses to GCSE that are mostly assessed by coursework and carry multiple GCSE equivalent awards. This school has been careful to use such provision sparingly and only where it best meets students' needs. This reduces the school's overall performance compared with other schools. However, students achieve creditably in more traditional courses. The school made great strides ahead in GCSE results some years ago. Improvement from year to year has slowed. Staff are currently making every effort to push standards higher. In the vast majority of lessons seen, achievement was at least good and sometimes outstanding.

In the sixth form, students make good progress from their starting points at GCSE, with marked success in, for example, mathematics, sciences and PE. Standards are better than they were some time ago. In all lessons seen, progress was good.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students' personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral, cultural and social development are good; moral and social development is sometimes outstanding. For example, students' showed considerable sense and sensitivity in discussing abortion, and their social and community engagement through sport is excellent. They enjoy school; they speak of their school with enthusiasm and participate with gusto in the wide range of extra-curricular activities available. Behaviour in lessons and around school is good and often outstanding, although the number of fixed period exclusions is higher than it need be. Attendance has improved due to the school's hard work but is still only average, and weakest in Year 11. Students know the importance of a healthy lifestyle, and this is promoted through healthy eating and exercise. They are aware of the dangers of drugs and alcohol, as well as the importance of secure relationships; they are well prepared to make choices about their own safety and well-being. The school makes good use of outside agencies to provide this type of information. The views of the school council are actively sought and acted upon – it has been responsible for redesigning the school's PE uniform. Pupils say that they feel safe in school and that bullying is rare. They are confident that they could turn to any member of staff for support. Students have opportunities to contribute to their local and wider community through fund raising efforts such as the Macmillan coffee morning. Opportunities to work collaboratively in school, and the development of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills, ensure advancement of the students' economic well-being.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The quality of teaching and learning is good. Lessons are well planned with interesting activities to stimulate students. Teachers' knowledge is good, their explanations are clear and good questioning consolidates students' understanding. Good ICT facilities are used effectively by teachers to enhance learning. The best lessons have brisk pace and challenging activities, but too many teachers are not stretching pupils to extend their thinking or develop independent learning skills.

There is a good system for monitoring lessons and pupils' work, so managers are well informed about the quality of teaching and learning. The school is beginning to consider organisational matters such as efficiency in coursework organisation and the most productive match of teachers to classes, for instance in science.

Good practice, for example in PE, is shared, to help improve teaching and learning in other subjects – for instance, the excellent PE assessment systems, records of progress, and ways of using demonstration of students' skills as models for others. Specialist status for sport has a positive impact on teaching and learning across the curriculum. Teachers' excellent relationships with students are a strong feature, resulting in a positive atmosphere conducive to learning, and contributing well to students' enjoyment. Students appreciate the efforts of their teachers and respond with good attitudes to learning. Teachers set challenging academic targets, but

students are not always clear on how to achieve them: they do not necessarily know how to make their next homework better than the previous one. Marking of students' work and the setting of homework are not done consistently across subjects. Effective support from teaching assistants ensures that students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities participate fully in lessons.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The school's curriculum is good in the main school and in the sixth form. There is increasing co-ordination with the middle schools where students cover the first two years of Key Stage 3. For older students, the school provides a range of vocational and traditional academic courses in collaboration with the further education college. This well balanced provision leads to good achievement. There is sufficient flexibility at Key Stage 4 to smooth the transition for students moving between the main school and the sixth form or further education. There is a firm focus on basic skills.

The curriculum is further enhanced by the school's specialist status for sports. For example, alongside the excellent PE curriculum, students have wide-ranging opportunities to participate in sports during breaks and after school and to be involved in promoting sport for others – many students are involved in the Community Sports Leader Award at different levels. This is making a positive contribution to the students' educational well-being: it helps them enjoy learning.

The school's strategy for grouping students in ability sets works well. Students and parents are actively engaged in choosing options, thus promoting good understanding of training and career paths. Subject departments actively seek feedback from students about the curriculum and teaching styles; they respond thoughtfully to this and their views have a positive impact on future developments.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Care, guidance and support are good. Safeguarding and child protection procedures are fully in place and all staff are aware of procedures. Risk assessments are established and regularly reviewed. Assessment and tracking procedures are effective, though the reliability of assessment information is not always secure. Targets are set but students are not always aware of how to improve their work in order to reach the next grade or level. Parents are provided with excellent guidelines on how to help their children and are encouraged to be involved in their learning. There are generous out-of-hours arrangements to boost students' standards or help them catch up. Support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good; overall they make similar progress to others. A safe haven room is provided for pupils who feel vulnerable and good use is made of multi-agency services.

One parent states, 'I appreciate that the school deals with anti-social behaviour promptly, so my child can study in a safe environment.' The school, rightly, has a 'zero-tolerance' policy on some forms of unacceptable behaviour. However, some students are subject to fixed term

exclusion in circumstances where many schools choose to use alternative sanctions within school.

The excellent catering and a very congenial dining room atmosphere contribute strongly to the pleasant social life of the school; unfortunately the great popularity of school meals makes for long queues.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The headteacher strives ardently for constant improvement in all aspects of the school's work. He is well supported in every endeavour by a large senior leadership team. Staff and students are well motivated and eager to do their best. Yet it is proving a gruelling task to push forward improvement at a pace to match the rapid gains that took place five years or so ago. Further gains in achievement and students' personal development are hard won. The school seeks to raise aspirations in the community, students' initiative in learning and self evaluation in the practices of subject departments.

The school has skilfully harnessed the motivation engendered by its Sports College specialism to secure many students' engagement across the curriculum. There is a well conceived, and well orchestrated, initiative to bring parents on side in supporting their sons and daughters as they work and revise at home. The learning culture is being reinforced; challenging targets are being set.

Checks and balances are in place to quality assure teaching and students' progress. Whilst these systems are good in the main, analysis of exactly how coursework is organised in certain subjects and how teachers are deployed could be more incisive and assessment of ongoing attainment could sometimes be sharper. Against a background of mostly very good behaviour and positive attitudes, there are systems that note patterns where these are not as they should be. With the counselling provided by directors of learning, there is generally effective control: exclusions are at a reasonable level though not reducing. Attendance is satisfactory but could be stronger. The school has tactics that won decisively the first rounds in the fight for improvement; it is aware of the need for review.

Leaders at all levels have a good grasp of how things stand: self evaluation is good. Day-to-day management is highly efficient and the development plans are sound. Governors give wise counsel and staunch support. There has been strong and durable improvement since the last inspection, particularly in making the best of its buildings. The school provides good value. There is good capacity for further improvement.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

1 October 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of Ashington High School, Northumberland, NE63 8DH

Thank you for all the help you gave us when we visited your school. We enjoyed our visit. We valued opportunity to talk with you in discussion groups, in lessons or as we chanced to meet you about the school. We were greatly impressed by the excellence in sport and the vast numbers of you participating at lunch time in voluntary activities.

You attend a good school. The results at all stages compare well with the results you had when you were younger. You conduct yourselves well around the school; you are courteous to one another, your teachers and visitors. You are keen to do well in lessons. The school is careful to provide you with sensible subject choices and plenty of additional activities, including exciting and affordable trips to exotic places. You are well looked after. The school is very well run and the head and senior staff are tireless in their efforts for continual improvement.

We have suggested a few things that the school should tackle.

- Boosting standards further by keeping even closer tabs on your progress, and checking up on things like coursework organisation;
- Boosting your learning by encouraging you to dare to jump ahead – for instance finding your own reliable short cuts in maths, or researching the internet using your own initiative; and helping you know exactly what might make your next week's work better – for instance by fuller comments on the work in your books;
- Keeping even more of you in the school and happy more of the time by chasing up non-attenders more and considering how best to deal with the very rare instances of poor behaviour.

Try to make sure you are in school everyday unless you are really unwell. We wish you all every success in the future. Keep up the sport – and the dancing!

Yours sincerely

Jim Bennetts

Lead inspector